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ABSTRACT

Career paths of humanities majors are discussed, based on the results of research studies. Attention is directed to: the shifting pattern of student enrollment by major field; employment opportunities in the corporate sector; entry-level employment opportunities; and long-range data that describe the career paths of college graduates. While business and computer science majors have increased, decreases have occurred in arts, humanities, and social sciences majors. Longitudinal data on career paths show that humanities graduates have fared as well in their careers as vocationally-trained graduates. However, humanities graduates face special problems when they seek their first job after college. There are limited opportunities for access to campus recruiters and limited interest by employers in those with liberal arts backgrounds. While technological knowledge may be useful to college graduates, the communication and interpersonal skills used in administrative positions are usually learned in a liberal arts curriculum. Colleges are beginning to recognize a need for more broadly educated graduates. Liberal arts requirements for business majors and business-related courses or cooperative education experience for liberal arts graduates are also important. (SW)

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What are the Career Paths in Business of Humanities Graduates?

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Humanities faculty don't need another crisis. But they have one in the students who attend their institutions. Undergraduates are haunted by "vocomania,"[1] a staunch belief that their college education must train them for specific jobs following graduation. In their view, a humanities concentration[2] does not support that objective. And, they are rejecting humanities majors in droves.

In fact, the undergraduates are statistically correct, at least for entry-level positions. Long-range data, however, argue more favorably that career opportunities are available to the humanities major. Coupled with new initiatives on the part of the corporate sector, these data act as a positive counter to the barrage of news stories about college-educated taxi drivers and waitresses that have made students fearful about choosing a humanities major.

To deal with the problems before them, students, their parents, and the academic community need to be better informed in three areas. First, they need to be aware of the shifting pattern of student enrollment by major field and of employment opportunities in the corporate sector. Second, they should be familiar with the information available about entry-level positions. And, finally, they need to turn their attention to long-range data that describe the career paths of college graduates. How does this information compare with what we know about entry-level opportunities? What does it suggest about counseling students on their college major and vocational choice?

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Changing Student Choices

Survey data support the view that in today's harsher economic climate and changed social context, students have substantially different views on the purpose of higher education than did their predecessors in the boom years of the 1960s.

The question of vocation didn't come in for much discussion among humanities undergraduates during the 1960s. A baccalaureate degree was a ticket to entry-level positions. Expanding social programs and a seemingly unending need for new elementary-secondary and college teachers guaranteed opportunity. Moreover, climbing the corporate ladder was not a high priority for many college graduates.

Survey data bear out these impressions. In a 1969 Carnegie Commission[3] survey of 70,000 undergraduates, 76 percent reported that "learning to get along with people" was an essential objective of their undergraduate education. Formulating values was a close second. In third place, 62 percent of the students said that acquiring substantive knowledge in a special field was essential. Only 59 percent of all students said that getting training and skills for an occupation was essential.

More recent data show that freshmen have quite different purposes in mind. In a representative sample of 188,000 freshmen in Fall 1982, 78 percent reported that getting a better job was the most important reason for going to college.[4] Seventy percent wanted to be able to make more money. Just over half wanted to "meet new, interesting people," and only 66 percent sought a general education. Thus, the order of reasons for going to college has virtually been reversed since the late 1960s.

Vocational interests have become dominant, but the earlier leading goals had not lost their appeal completely.

These shifts in objectives are clearly reflected in undergraduates' increasing tendency to choose vocationally-related majors. An annual survey of entering freshmen conducted since the mid-1960s[5] shows sharp increases in business and computer science, for example. Between 1966 and 1981, business majors showed an

increase from slightly more than 15 percent to more than 20 percent for men and from about 7 percent to approximately 17 percent for women. In some business concentrations, interest increased by more than half, from 13 percent to 22 percent. Interest in computer science increased from 0 percent to 3.7 percent during this period.

In dramatic contrast, the arts, humanities, and social sciences lost their dominant place in undergraduate education. In 1966, nearly one-third of all freshmen chose these majors, compared to one-ninth in 1981. English was particularly hard-hit, losing more than 80 percent of its students, down from 4.4 percent to .9 percent in 15 years.[6]

Jobs and Careers

Such preparation may not consider the longer view. Research shows that a distinction needs to be made between entry-level jobs and career paths because access to employment and employment tasks change over time.

Longitudinal data on career paths for vocationally trained and humanities graduates show that the latter have fared equally well in their careers. This research also suggests an explanation for the career success of humanities majors. Work responsibilities change significantly after several years of employment. Broader, less content specific skills are required, and the need for interpersonal and communications skills increases.[7] These skills are ones in which humanities graduates are likely to be well trained.

Entry Into the Market

The nation's needs are increasingly technological, and the system for recruiting new college graduates into the ranks of the employed is geared more toward those with undergraduate training in professional fields. Students have been getting the message. If you major in business, engineering, or other technological fields, recruiters are more likely to be receptive to interviewing you on campus. But if you major in a humanities subject, you have to cast a very large net with

your resume. It's simply harder to find that first job.

Data on campus job recruiting confirm this situation. The College Placement Council's Recruiting 83[8] shows that private employers in engineering and business will schedule a greater number of interviews this year than will employers in other fields. Leading the way, aerospace, electronics, and instruments employers plan 12,853 interview schedules, down by 7 percent from the previous year. (Each schedule represents between 11 and 14 individual student interviews.)

By comparison, prospects are much slimmer for campus interviews for humanities students in jobs directly related to their educational background. The number of interview schedules for 1982-1983 in the non-profit and educational institutions sector (nonpublic) is 630, up a surprising 20 percent from 527 in the previous year. But research and consulting organizations, another likely employer of humanities graduates, reported fewer interview schedules in 1982-1983: 801 interview schedules are planned, down by 10 percent from the previous year.

In the public sector, very few liberal arts graduates are expected to be hired. Under the College Placement Council's Liberal Arts and Miscellaneous category, the federal government reports that it will hire 2,500 people in the "Other Professional/Administrative Positions" group, down by 7 percent from its 1982 hires. And, it will hire only 80 people in each of the social sciences and educators categories.

Humanities graduates clearly face special problems when they seek their first job after college. There are only limited opportunities for access to campus recruiters, and equally limited interest on employers' part in those with liberal arts backgrounds. Furthermore, there are very few occupational classifications to which the title "Humanities Graduate" can be affixed. Humanities graduates can be very much at sea when they launch their job search.

Their predicament shows up in the statistics on unemployment and underemployment of recent college graduates. The most recent survey data from the National Center for Education Statistics show that 1976-1977 graduates in the humanities have the highest rate of

unemployment (43 percent) compared to only one fifth (19 percent) of business and management graduates.[9] (Underemployed graduates are those who are not working in professional, managerial, or technical types of jobs, and who report that, in their opinion, a college degree was not required to get their job.)

At the same time, it should be noted that many humanities graduates seek advanced degrees. Twenty-six percent of humanities* graduates were enrolled for an advanced degree compared with only 15 percent of business and management graduates and 11 percent of engineers.

While enrolled for advanced degrees, 43 percent of the humanities graduates reported that they were underemployed in full-time positions. In comparison, business and management graduates experienced a 2 percent drop in underemployment in their full-time jobs when they returned to school.

These differences in the employment status of recent humanities graduates and others were equally telling when salaries are compared. In February 1978, the average annual salary for a humanities graduate employed full-time was $9,700; business and management graduates earned $13,000, a difference of 42 percent. In 1980-1981, both men and women graduates in accounting were being offered an average monthly salary of $1,480. Men with humanities degrees could expect an average monthly salary of $1,275, while women were being offered $1,157.[10]

Institutional studies appear to support the data, but they report less dissatisfaction with employment among the liberal arts graduates than the national data would suggest. A 1976 survey of graduates from the classes of 1975, 1970, 1965, and 1960 at eleven midwestern liberal arts colleges found that the graduates were generally satisfied with their undergraduate education, particularly the inculcation of analytical thinking, a major goal of their institutions.[11]

*"Humanities" in this survey excludes some of the disciplines included in the NEH definition. History, for example, is classified in the social sciences category.

Further, the survey found that employment opportunities are available. More than half of the male graduates from the classes of 1960, 1965, and 1970 reported continuous employment, except for job changes, since graduation. The major explanation for lack of continuity was clearly military experience. For women, continuous employment was more frequently interrupted by time out for family responsibilities, although more than half of the 1970 female graduates reported continuous employment.

The 1975 class reported that 85 percent of the men and 83 percent of the women were generally satisfied with their education in terms of "employability," despite the fact that they had little access to vocational training at their colleges. But compared to the national average, a greater percentage of these recent graduates went to graduate school full-time--36 percent of the men and 22 percent of the women. Forty-eight percent of the men and 56 percent of the women were employed full-time.

Career Paths

Liberal arts graduates have been more successful in their career paths in business than could be predicted from the entry-level data discussed here. Evidence on career paths indicates that college students who want a more complete understanding of their employment prospects need to consider the difference in requirements for entry-level jobs and similarly related employment and the more complex set of responsibilities and activities that make up a career path.

Research shows that college graduates who advanced to positions of greater responsibility in their work had to call upon skills different from those they used in their first position. Vocational preparation may provide easier access to first jobs, but its importance to employment diminishes with time.

The evidence for this finding comes from follow-up surveys of freshmen classes since the 1960s. Since 1961, a representative national sample of entering freshmen have been surveyed each year on a range of characteristics, including their undergraduate major. The data from this Cooperative Institutional Research Program provides a reliable data base for researchers.

A 1979 report on the employment history of college graduates used this data base to follow the history of 1970 college freshmen.[12] The report also incorporates the findings of a similar survey conducted in 1974 of 1961 freshmen. The earlier survey reported responses from nearly 4,000 graduates; there were roughly 9,000 responses in the more recent survey, conducted in 1977.

None of the occupational categories in this study clearly require a humanities concentration. However, this study is revealing for what it demonstrates about movement along career paths: time distances employees from their original tasks.

Both surveys found that many graduates had not stayed with the occupations that they had elected as freshmen, although their choice of major had remained fairly consistent throughout their college years. Less than half of the respondents in the 1974 survey, out of school for nine years, reported that their anticipated occupation had become their actual occupation.

In contrast, the 1977 respondents, out of school for three years or less, reported that many more of them were in the occupations for which they had planned. More than half of the engineers and educators, for instance, had planned on being in these occupations.[13]

But even these groups showed a decline over a longer period. Among engineers, only 36 percent of the 1974 respondents were still in that occupational class; 12 percent had become administrators; and 14 percent were in other occupations. Educators, too, had moved out of that occupation. In the 1974 group, only 46 percent of the educators were still working in that capacity, while 11 percent had become administrators.

These shifts in occupational plans point to other important changes in employment patterns that occur over time. Clearly, occupational shifts also mean that employees rely less on the substantive knowledge that they acquired in their undergraduate major and more on their job experience. Bisconti[14] examined the employment experiences of 524 employees who earned baccalaureate degrees and were rated as having "very good or excellent" job performances. These respondents, graduates, of the mid-1960s and the mid-1970s, were employed in private industry for the most part.

Two years after their initial employment, the mid-1970s graduates reported that 40 percent of their time was spent in administration and management; 44 percent in writing and editing; and, 28 percent in program planning and budgeting. However, these graduates were more involved in several new occupations that played a less important role for their older counterparts at the same point in their careers. These categories are data processing and computers; engineering; and production quality and control.

Among this population, substantive knowledge, as measured by their courses in their college major, played a more important role for more recent graduates than for earlier ones. Mid-1970s graduates reported that they relied on their majors very much (35 percent) or moderately (37 percent), but 80 percent also found that on-the-job experience was very important. In contrast, only 17 percent found it moderately significant. But 90 percent reported that on-the-job experience was very important.

Humanities majors reported that their undergraduate education was particularly useful in selected occupations. English majors said that they used their background quite frequently as administrators (47 percent), educators (73 percent), and other professional (34 percent). Arts and other humanities majors also used their education in these occupations: administrator (18 percent); educator (70 percent); and other professional (33 percent).[15]

As their careers progress, employees take on new tasks for which their undergraduate concentrations have not directly prepared them. Bisconti's study showed that dramatic changes in employment activities had occured for the older graduates. By 1977, these employees spent from one-half to three-quarters of their time in administration and management; writing and editing; and program planning and budgeting. In their initial positions, they had spent only from one-tenth (program planning and budgeting) to nearly one-third (writing and editing) of their time on these tasks.[16]

Another study also demonstrates that even within a particular employment category, employees perform a wide variety of activities for which their undergraduate major may not have prepared them. When the 1961 entering freshmen class was surveyed in the mid-1970s, they were engaged in activities that cut across occupational boundaries. Administration and management was the

activity most engaged in across occupational groups, ranging from a high of 80 percent for administrators (followed by 71 percent for accountants) to a low of 19 percent for educators. Writing and editing were also used extensively, with a surprising 33 percent of the engineers reporting involvement, the highest percentage for any occupational category.[17]

These analyses of mid-career activities question, of course, whether by mid-career humanities graduates might not well be as successful as their engineering or business counterparts. A study by the American Telephone and Telegraph Company (AT&T) suggests that liberal arts graduates can indeed develop promising careers in business.[18]

Since 1956, AT&T has been assessing its young management staff to determine what qualities make for successful promotion to mid-level management positions. To date, more than 250,000 employees have gone through this process. The assessment team has proven so successful in forecasting future mid-level management that hundreds of other companies have adopted its methods.

Its findings on the correlation between successful managers and undergraduate major are therefore especially interesting. The assessment team concluded that:

> On overall ratings of potential for middle management...there were highly significant group differences. Nearly half (46 percent) of the humanities and social science majors were considered to have potential for middle management, compared to only 31 percent of of the business majors and 26 percent of the engineers. 19

Two groups of employees were studied: one since 1956 and the other since 1977. For a company that has a technological basis, these groups of young managers were strongly biased toward the liberal arts. In the 1956 group, 38 percent were liberal arts graduates--10 percent humanities, 22 percent social science, 1 percent math, and 5 percent science. Among the other degree categories, engineering accounted for 25 percent in 1956 and 13 percent in 1977; business was 35 percent and 37 percent in those years, respectively; and, other was 2 percent and 6 percent.

Significantly, the management assessment process looks at skill areas similar to those identified as important in the other studies discussed here. The areas in which ability is considered important for promotion include: administrative skills (planning and organizing; decisionmaking; creativity); interpersonal skills (leadership; oral communication; forcefulness); intellectual ability (range of interests; general mental ability; writing); and, motivation to succeed.

In both the older and younger cohorts, humanities/social science and business graduates scored significantly higher than math/science and engineering graduates across all dimensions. In both groups, humanities/social science and business were virtually equal in administrative skills. The younger humanities/social science cohort scored higher in interpersonal skills than business graduates, but their score was the same for the older cohort (The 1956 assessment used High/Low ratings; the 1977 assessment used a scale of 1 to 5.)

In the area of intellectual ability, both humanities/social science cohorts were higher than the business graduates, except in the area of quantitative skills, where they had low scores.

On managerial motivation, the business graduates and humanities/social science graduates showed nearly equivalent ratings in all areas except the need for advancement, in which the younger business graduates scored higher than the humanities/social science group.

In the long run, however, engineers caught up with humanities/social science and business graduates in terms of reaching mid-level management. Their greatest gains occurred between their eighth and twentieth year of employment. But humanities and social science graduates generally had outperformed the more technologically oriented graduates.

The AT&T study does not offer any explanation for this difference in the rate of promotion for engineers and other graduates. But the findings from Bisconti's study of successful employees suggest an explanation that is universally applicable: on-the-job training, so to speak, in the areas of communications and interpersonal relationships had to occur for a successful career to develop. Those with

liberal arts backgrounds may be better prepared to learn such skills, or already be well-grounded in them, than their more technologically trained counterparts.

When Bisconti asked the mid-1960s and mid-1970s graduates to recommend areas of undergraduate study that would be useful for students considering similar careers, the most popular were: English, business administration, mathematics, economics, psychology, and accounting.[20]

However, as Bisconti points out, English is probably recommended less for its focus on great literature and more because it emphasizes good writing; in fact, one respondent recommended the narrower category of "Business English."[21] (A professor of English literature would certainly argue that the study of literature encourages good writing.) Other respondents suggested that the discipline of English encourages logical and critical thinking.[22]

Other arts and humanities courses were less important in these recommendations, but they were also seen as contributing to a well-rounded person and as an aid in interpersonal skills and logical thinking.[23]

To some, these reports of progress up the corporate ladder may invoke images of the unhappy man in the gray flannel suit. Are humanists satisfied with their careers in business? Yes. For humanities graduates, business administration offered the most satisfying career in a mid-1970s study of students who had entered college in 1961.[24] English majors reported that the next most satisfying career was in education; other arts and humanities majors cited salesperson as their second most satisfactory occupational category.

Interestingly, business administration majors did not report as high a level of satisfaction with their careers in administration. For this group, educator was the most satisfying occupation, followed by other professional, with administration coming in third place.

This finding accords with Bisconti's and Solmon's observation that:

> For many major fields, it is not those who follow the dominant pattern but rather the mavericks who are most satisfied. The dominantly selected occupation is not always the most associated with job satisfaction.[25]

Opting for the Humanities

The data on entry-level job opportunities for humanities graduates are certainly daunting. After spending anywhere from $8,000 to $40,000 on an undergraduate education, students and their parents might well ask what they have gained in terms of wider job opportunities. The answer can and should be more than an apologetic smile or a long lecture on the value of the humanities (valuable as they are).

When students consider choosing a major, they need to be presented with a case for the humanities that employs long-range data on career paths. It is true that these data focus on graduates who came into the job market in a different social, economic, and technological context. But in mid-career, their activities and responsibilities are based more upon their place in an organizational context than on their substantive undergraduate learning. Technological knowledge may be useful to them, but the communications and interpersonal skills used in administrative positions are usually learned in a liberal arts curriculum.

Looking to the future, these skills will continue to be important. The chief executive officer of General Motors asserted the need for liberal arts graduates in discussing the rationale for an experimental program for liberal arts graduates in the midwest.

> this new generation of business leadership recognizes...that it must take on far greater responsibilities in a modern society. It must continue to compete in the traditional marketplace...But it must also enter a new... marketplace of ideas, where the forces that shape society have always been determined. Only leadership with many and varied talents can hope to be successful in such an ideological marketplace--and this is why the

liberal arts in industry are assuming so much importance today.[26]

Colleges are also beginning to recognize a need for more broadly educated graduates. Beginning in Fall 1981 the College of Business Administration in the University of Minnesota launched a new curriculum with nine more required courses in the liberal arts, raising the total liberal arts requirement to 19 courses.[27] At the same time, the number of electives in the business school has been reduced to discourage narrow specialization.

This new effort is being supported by a locally-based corporation. Cargill, Inc. is providing $50,000 per year for the next 10 years to fund a new position of director of undergraduate studies. The director's role will be to coordinate the efforts of the business college and liberal arts faculty to develop this program.

At the same time, liberal arts faculty need to take steps to guide their students in preparing for entry-level jobs. Simply graduating with a baccalaureate degree is rarely enough any more. Some liberal arts institutions are going through major curricular reorganization to add a vocational dimension to their program.[28] Others may simply provide advice to undergraduates on how to make themselves more attractive for an entry-level position and how to develop a job-hunting strategy.

It is also noteworthy that employers may be responsive to such efforts. A College Placement Council survey of nearly 2,000 employers in the early 1970s found that 75 percent would hire liberal arts graduates who had business-related courses or cooperative education experience in business.[29] Another survey also suggests that some business experience alters employers' perception on the attractiveness of liberal arts graduates for entry-level positions.[30]

Such changes are not compromises. They are efforts to address the real problems of undergraduates facing a difficult job market. They are strategies for combining this concern with the long-range advantages of a liberal arts education in the development of a career.

Footnotes

1 Levine, Arthur, When Dreams and Heroes Died, A Portrait of Today's College Student (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1980), p. 62.

2 As used here, humanities is an umbrella term, encompassing the disciplines in the National Endowment for the Humanities' definition: "The term 'humanities' includes, but is not limited to, the study of the following: language, both modern and classical; linguistics; literature; history; jurisprudence, philosophy; archaeology; comparative religion; ethics; the history, criticism, and theory of the arts; those aspects of the social sciences which have a humanistic content and employ humanistic methods; and the study and application of the humanities to the human environment with particular attention to the relevance of the humanities to the current conditions of national life." (Public Law 89-209).

3 Levine, p. 61.

4 The Chronicle of Higher Education, January 26, 1983, p. 11, reporting results of Astin, Alexander W., The American Freshmen: National Norms for Fall 1982.

5 Astin, Alexander W., "The American Freshman, 1966-1981: Some Implications for Educational Policy and Practice." Paper prepared for the National Commission on Excellence in Education, May 1982.

6 It should be noted that between 40 to 60 percent of freshmen who declare a major when they enter college, stay with that major over four years. See Ochsner, Nancy L. and Solmon, Lewis C., College Education and Employment...The Recent Graduates (Bethlehem, Pa.: The CPC Foundation, 1979), pp. 16-17.

7 Bisconti, Ann Stouffer and Solmon, Lewis C., College Education on the Job...The Graduates Viewpoint (Bethlehem, Pa.: The CPC Foundation, 1976), p. 5.

8 Recruiting 83. Economy's Effect on 1982-1983 Recruiting Still Unknown (Bethlehem, Pa.: The College Place Council, Inc.)

9 Metz, A. Stafford and Hammer, Charles H., Labor Force Status of Recent College Graduates (Washington, D. C.: National Center for Education Statistics, 1981). The following discussion is based on the data presented in this report, especially Tables 2 and 3.

10 Grant, W. Vance and Eiden, Leo J., Digest of Education Statistics 1982. (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, 1982), Table 166.

11 Wishart, Patricia and Rossman, Jack, Career Patterns Employment, and Earnings of Graduates of 11 ACM Colleges. Final Report to the Fund for the Improvement of Post-secondary Education, December 19, 1977, p. 5.

12 Ochsner and Solmon 1979, Table A-6.

13 Ochsner and Solmon 1979, Table A-5.

14 Bisconti, Ann Stouffer, College and Other Stepping Stones. A Study of Learning Experiences That Contribute to Effective Performance in Early and Long-Run Jobs (Bethlehem, Pa., : The CPC Foundation, 1980).

15 Bisconti and Solmon 1976, Table 10.

16 Bisconti 1980, Table 4.

17 Bisconti and Solmon, 1976, Table 9.

18 Beck, Robert E., The Liberal Arts Major in Bell System Management (Washington, D.C.: Association of American Colleges, 1981).

19 Beck 1981, p. 12. Emphasis in the original.

20 Bisconti 1980, Table 28.

21 Bisconti 1980, p. 67.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 Bisconti, Ann Stouffer and Solmon, Lewis C., Job Satisfaction After College...The Graduates Viewpoint (Bethlehem, Pa.,: The CPC Foundation, 1977), Tables 13 and 14.

25 Bisconti and Solmon, 1977, p. 39. Emphasis in the original.

26 "Why Business Needs the Liberal Arts," in Liberal Learning and Business Careers (Thomas B. Jones, ed.) (St. Paul, Minn.: Metropolitan State University, May 1982), p. 35.

27 Youngblood, Dick, "'U' business college to expand students' liberal arts training," Minneapolis Star Tribune, March 24, 1981, Section A/Part II.

28 See, for example, Tom Jones, "What are Colleges and Business Already Doing to Relate Liberal Arts and Business?" Paper presented at the Conference on the Humanities and Careers in Business, April 1983.

29 Survey cited in Coyne, Grover C., "Career Opportunities and the Humanities Major: A Profile of Changing Needs,: College Student Journal 11 (1977), p. 203.

30 Grove 1977, citing a study conducted by the Western College Placement Association, 1975.